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ARCHÆOLOGY AND TAMIL STUDIES

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Tamilnad is one of the most famous regions of India for the archæologists. Some big temples and archæological remains have been early alluded to by some European travellers in the first centuries of the intercourses between East and West. But the real interest in Indian archæology actually began during the eighteenth century. At that time, several descriptions and maps of monuments have been published. As usually, as soon as some new knowledge of ancient archæological remains is acquired, a few scholars have hastily begun to compare these monuments with others in different countries, chiefly with those of Egypt, without taking into account the dates and the historical evidence. Tamilnad's temples and sculptures have been very often referred to. The *goopuram's* of *Cithamparam* temple have been boldly assimilated to Egyptian pyramids and Thomas Maurice from 1794 to 1806 wrote seven volumes on *Indian Antiquities* devoted not only to the description of the monuments, the history and the culture of India but also to trace similarities between the ancient Indian art and the antiquities of Persia, Greece and Egypt. He declared himself, in his third volume dealing with comparisons of sacred edifices of Hindostan and Egypt : " The Antiquities of India will be made to illustrate those of Egypt." Even Champollion, the famous decipherer of Egyptian hieroglyphs, before recognising that the ancient Egyptian language was akin to Coptic language, undertook the study of Sanskrit, as he thought at that time, that owing to the supposed similarities of Indian and Egyptian archælogical materials, Egyptian civilisation was going to be explained through Indian culture.

Actually, the temptation to speculate about the origins and primary connexions of the new discovered things, before properly knowing these very things, proceeds from enthusiasm, not from science. The first scientific study of the archæology of Tamilnad

should have been the study of the monuments in themselves and in their historical setting. The first comprehensive attempt to describe the whole of the Indian archæological remains was done in 1821, at Paris, by Langlès in two big volumes, *Monuments anciens et modernes de l'Hindoustan* (Ancient and modern monuments of Hindustan). In this work the monuments of Tamilnad were duly described not as isolated ones, but together with those of All-India. Unfortunately the history of India was not yet enough studied at that time and the author still indulged in superficial comparisons with Egypt. Nevertheless this pioneer's work, like some good separate descriptions previously published chiefly by English and Danish authors, rightly included late monuments, the *puthumanhthapam* of Mathurai for example. The bias in favour of the oldest ones, which is still prevalent in our days, was not yet in force. Langlès knew the *puthumanhthapam* was built by Thirumalai Nhaayakar after 1623. That was not for him a reason for a lesser appreciation of its art and wonderful workmanship.

Later, a prejudice against the late dates has been developed. It is sure, archæology, according to the very meaning of its name, has to deal only with old things. The history of art is also entitled to neglect what is not recognised by the authors as gifted with an artistical value. But, if so strictly defined, they do not cover all the present needs of the humanistic sciences. The archæology leaves out a significative part of the material achievements of the peoples and the history of art is subjective. The first one must be completed, the second one improved. That is required for the sake of a fully scientific knowledge.

Humanistic sciences are still in infancy unlike the biological sciences, because they are not yet free from emotional trends and traditional methods of literary and artistical studies. As long as natural history has been chiefly interested in the curiosities and beauties of nature, it has not reached the status of a productive science. An amateur of butterflies was not an entomologist. The great success of biological sciences began only when the investigations intended to become complete and when a hypothesis was accepted only as provisional and on the condition to represent the natural connexion between

all the available data, without being in contradiction with any of these. In the study of the peoples, in humanistic sciences, this rule is also compulsory. If we select some privileged features according to our taste, we may produce very attractive theories, we cannot get a true picture of the reality, we cannot be sure to do full justice to the culture we are dealing with.

When we think about dead civilisations, like those of old Egypt or old Mesopotamia, all the data are in the proper field of archæology. But it is not so when the civilisation is living and rests upon an old tradition, like in Tamilnad. Then we cannot do justice to Tamil people if we limit our enquiries to its obscure origins and oldest remains, to the proper field of traditional archæology. We cannot draw a boundary line between ancient and modern times. We cannot be stopped by the primary meaning of the word designating our science, since the matter of this science is still there when the word becomes inadequate. Otherwise we miss the continuity of the Tamil culture and its true knowledge, because this continuity is one of the main features of its nature.

That is why, in the studies we try to do for a scientific knowledge of Tamilnad, we must both cultivate proper archæology and the extension of it towards the present.

Moreover, archæology, even extended, cannot work alone, as archæological remains are not merely results of technics, but also material evidences of the culture and the life of the society throughout the history. In some countries both culture and history corresponding to the monuments are lost. That is the case in Eastern Island, for example, where there are huge statues on one side, some pieces of wood inscribed with undeciphered texts, and people knowing very little about the statues and texts on the other side. There the stone is a mute witness of the past. On the contrary in Tamilnad the scholars are confronted with a bulk of various kinds of documents illustrating each other.

Together with architectural and iconographical monuments, old utensils, remains of human work of several kinds, there are innumerable inscriptions, very often directly connected with the temples, buildings,

images, etc. . . . There is also the bulk of two literatures in Tamil and in Sanskrit and even in other languages. These literatures supply several kinds of data : legends praising holy places, temples and *thiirththam*, and explaining the images, religious books revealing the ideal of devotees who built and worshipped the temples, and technical treatises, *śilpaśaastra* or *kriyaapaada* of the Agamas, giving the rules to build the temples and the palaces and to make the images. Properly historical accounts are few, but the inscriptions, the literature, the foreign testimonies, together with the monuments, enable the scholars to reconstruct at least a part of the lost history.

That is not all. Tamilians have played a great rôle in the general expansion of Indian culture beyond the oceans, in Indochina, Indonesia and China. In these countries we find in the monuments and inscriptions many evidences of Tamil influence. Even in China, at one place where Marco Polo had seen, at the end of the XIII century, a large Indian merchant colony, the scattered elements of ruined temples give evidence of the purely Tamil structure and decoration of these temples. Also a Tamil inscription is preserved there. Elsewhere, in South-East Asia, Tamil inscriptions have been discovered. They are not very old and not very numerous in comparison with the very rich Sanskrit epigraphy of those countries. But even the oldest Sanskrit inscription ever found in Indochina, the so called Vo-canh inscription, which belongs to the III century, bears testimony to Tamil influence, referring to one king śriMâra, *i.e.*, bearing the famous Pāndyan title *maatan*. If Tamilians have very often written their inscriptions in Sanskrit and not in Tamil it is because Sanskrit, before Persian and English, was commonly used as a link language between peoples of different parts of India and also in their relations with foreigners. Moreover, in the last centuries and till the recent period, Hindu priests in Thailand and Cambodia used Tamil texts and Sanskrit texts written in the grantha character special to Tamilnad. At the same time the Hindu iconography of these countries was of Tamil origin. In Java, Agastya is represented almost like in Tamilnad and his cult is explained by the data of the Agamas of Tamilnad. In Cambodia Kaaraikkalammaiyaar is already represented at the feet of Nateśa in the X century just like, later, at Tanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram.

Such is the immense material at the disposal of the scholars who want to study Tamilnad and the Tamilians through archæology and through all the different sources completing and explaining the archæological ones.

Nobody is able to personally master all these different kinds of documents but coordinate teams may do. They have to collect systematically the basic documentation in its different elements and to confront their findings.

Let us take some examples.

Since the first beginnings of the Indological researches the Greek and Latin accounts on India have been published and translated. They gave evidences of current relations between India and specially South India with the Western world. Many place names given in these documents, like Ptolemaeus's *Geography* and *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* have been identified in Indian countries. Some kings referred to by names were also identified in Indian documents. That gave credit to Greek and Latin accounts. Findings of Roman coins in India confirmed, already in the XVIII century, the reality of commercial intercourses between India and Roman Empire. Some archæological discoveries, haphazardly done, like at Virampatnam near Pondicherry, in a place wrongly but usually named Arikamedu after the excavations, have given much valuable new evidences. That has been a great encouragement to make other excavations in places whose names are given by the Greek documents. Archæological Survey of Madras and Madras University have undertaken excavations in these sites and in those which are famous according to the Sangam Tamil literature. But, till recently it was not so easy to find the exactly relevant spot to be digged. Observation and borings cannot always be successful. Fortunately, now, the physicists are able to put at the disposal of archæologists different methods of detection of buried remains, like electric resistivity and exploration with a proton magnetometer.

With a very sensitive apparatus it is possible to discover behind the surface of the soil the differences of electric resistivity between places where something is buried and places of homogeneous soil.

Similarly, with the proton magnetomer it is possible to detect the presence of buried remains. After dividing the surface of the field into numbered squares, a detector is put on each one. If nothing is buried the results of magnetic mensuration are similar in all the squares. Differences in some square designate the spot where digging may lead to findings. We have introduced this method of detection at *KaaveeripaTTiNam* and other places in 1966 with a physicist coming from Paris. The National Geophysical Laboratory, Hyderabad, has resumed the work for a time. We are now preparing another mission from Paris for the same purpose. This mission will arrive in about two months. We hope it will help systematic archæological exploration of ancient places referred to in Tamil literature or in Græcolatin texts or in both.

Another discovery in physics will help the archæologists. Prof. Thellier of Paris has established that the burnt bricks are keeping for ever a trace of the direction and intensity of the magnetic terrestrial current as it was at the moment they were cooling after burning. It is possible to recognise its direction and to measure its intensity. The results are impoitant first for the geophysicists who, thanks to that, get a knowledge of the terrestrial magnetism in the past and in different countries of the world. At the first stage it is archæology which helps physics in ascertaining the date of the bricks and their burning place. But as soon as a number of results will be obtained in the same region, it will be possible to draw a curve of variations of magnetic field in this region during a period of time. Then, the archæologist will be in a position to get from the physicist the date of undated bricks, according to the place of remanent magnetism of these bricks in the variation curve. The results will help to check those got from carbon 14. Another example to show how other scientific researches have now to cooperate with the archæology, being already conducted in Tamilnad.

When travelling through Tamilnad it is sometimes surprising to come across many ruins of temples or other remains in some regions now very poor with few inhabitants. Obviously the conditions of life in those regions have changed after a period of some prosperity. But it would be useful to ascertain what kind of change has happened.

and the reasons of this change. The determination of the vegetation which grew in the past in the same region, also the study of the conditions of soil and climate offered to the vegetation may give the answer. The scientific section of the French Institute Pondicherry, under the direction of Prof. Gaussen and Dr. Legris, has already collected detailed information on the ecological conditions for the vegetation in India, and first in Tamilnad, and has established a laboratory for pollen-analysis. Pollens of flowers are often well preserved in the soil since the antiquity and even geological periods. So, after describing the pollens of tropical plants, it is possible to know which plants were growing in the past, when we recognize their pollens at different levels in the archæological excavations.

So, archæology and sciences may now help each other for a better knowledge of the civilisations in their natural setting. But the main results to be expected still come from the parallel enquiries in the monuments, in the life of the present populations and in the texts, epigraphical and literary.

In Tamilnad, the main current of tradition explains the foundation, the building and the use for worship, pilgrimages, etc. . . . of the numerous old and new temples, as well as the religious creeds and the rituals performed. But, till recent period the Tamil literary sources have not been utilised enough for the correct appreciation of the narrow links between the monuments and the religious thought and practice. Many scholars have been satisfied with the study of large texts popular everywhere throughout India, including Tamilnad, and belonging to the general Hindu religion, like Mahabharata, Ramayana and Bhagavatapurana. Now a great deal of work is required to collect and examine the literatures in Tamil and Sanskrit composed by Tamilians with special reference to their specific ideas and places of interest. These documents are in Tamil and in Sanskrit as well, sometimes in the mixture of Tamil and Sanskrit which is called *maNipravaalham.* Sanskrit texts in Tamilnad are not always borrowed from Northern India; many have been genuine products from Tamilnad.

After the adoption of Sanskrit by the Tamilians as a link language, like now is English, and in the course of its use along the centuries,

this Sanskrit was an additional but direct mean of expression of Tamilians and, while enriching the general Sanskrit literature as they did very often with authors like Śankara or Ramanuja, side by side with the Tamil literature, Tamilians have got a second glory. In any way, both Sanskrit and Tamil literatures of Tamilnad, complementing each other, used together and connected with the same objects, must be studied together. The cooperation of specialists of both is necessary.

That is why we have undertaken the collection, edition and interpretation of the *Agamas* and the study of *sthalapuranas* corresponding to temples and iconography, like *ThiruvilhaiyaaTalhpuraaNam* for Mathurai or *KaanjcipuraaNam* for Kanchi. *Puranam's* give the legends, *Śilpaśastras* the rules, Tamil texts illustrate the emotional feelings and the thought.

Tamil texts are specially precious as they evoke the life of the people and bear testimonies of true local specific variations in the traditions. For example, Sangam Tamil texts refering to Murugan, *ThirumuruKaattuppaTai* and *ParipaaTal*, give a view of Murugan different in some features from those which are current according to *Kandapuranam* and other texts. No image of Murugan presently known in Tamilnad does correspond to the description of his image as given in the *ThirumuruKaattuppaTai*. Thus the confrontation of monuments and texts gives rise to new problems as well as solving others.

The evaluation of validity and age of legends is also full of problems. The scholars must be very cautions either in accepting or rejecting the legends according the date of texts or oral accounts in which they bear witness to the existence of legends appearing only in late texts. The story of Minatci or Tadadagai before her marriage with Siva-Sokkanadar or Sundaresvarar, is told in the *ThiruvilhaiyaaTalhpuraaNam* in the version of the XII century, for the first time. But we know, thanks to the Greek authors who have preserved quotations from the lost report of Megasthenes after his embassy to Chandragupta, that this legend of Pandyan country had already been told to Megasthenes in Northern India as being located in the South. This is in the Greek literature the famous legend of Pandaia, daughter of Indian

Herakles. The Pandyan original legend was already current in the Pandyan kingdom and already widespread to Northern India before the end of the IV century B.C., date of the embassy of Megasthenes. In this case we have an evidence of the long life and permanence of traditions.

In other cases, on the contrary, if we consider some recent stories corresponding to late events we may have the opportunity to observe quick variations in the story and the influence of material accidents for the creation of the story itself. In the *puthumanhthapam* of Tirumalai Nayakkar already referred to, the king has been represented accompanied with his queens by the sculptor Sundaramurti Achari. When this artist was polishing the statue of the queen who stands at the left of the king, a splinter of stone fell down from the thigh of the statue. Actually this peculiarity is still visible on the statue. Nilakantha Dikshita was then the prime minister of Madurai. He said the accident was due to divine intervention, because the queen had really such a mark on the thigh. Apparently god wanted the statue quite resemble the original. But the king became very angry and ordered to burn the eyes of his minister. Later he recognised Nilakantha had seen the defect through his divine insight. That is the legendary explanation of the defect on the statue according to the texts and oral account of Nilakantha's life and these versions differ in telling the later events. But there is another explanation of the defect. At the end of the XVIII century another story was told at Madurai. Tirumalai Nayakkar and the queen visited the *puthumanhthapam*. The queen said this building was similar to the stables in her father's palace at Tanjavur. This depreciation infuriated the king who unsheathed his sword and wounded the queen at the place where the mark is represented. So we have significative examples of fanciful stories forged to explain at any cost some material details in the monuments. Such kind of stories though they have no value in itself may be illustrative of popular imagination. But more important is the confrontation of artistical styles and features with the poetical literature of the same periods and places, as they are closely connected. To keep with the subject of Madurai art, we may observe the same trend towards richness of forms, care and refinement of details, mastery of workmanship and intensity of devotion

both in art and poetry of the XVII century. By parallel studies of monuments and literature we are sure to get a more comprehensive view of the Tamilian society.

But even much more important are the epigraphical studies. Tamilnad is the country of India where the inscriptions on monuments, or bronzes, or copper plates are the most numerous and full of historical and cultural data. The efforts to take the census of all and to publish many of them have been since a long time very great and effective thanks to the office of Government Epigraphist and also some enthusiastic individual workers. But many, chiefly belonging to neglected late periods, are still waiting for study. We hope means at the disposal of the office and scholars will be increased as soon as possible. It is an urgent need for a deep knowledge of Tamil people.

Ethnological enquiries are also very useful to elucidate some archæological problems, as well as for a general knowledge of the country. Often ethnological enquiries are confined to small groups living in the margin of the society and having not much to do with monuments and archæology. But they may preserve features and habits illuminating the researches in prehistory, protohistory and technology. They may even help some researches in historical archæology.

Many funeral monuments are well known in the Madras country, specially near the bank of Palar river. Each one essentially consists in one sarcophagus in earthware (samples are exhibited in Madras Museum) buried under a stone construction : four vertical slabs arranged in square and covered by a horizontal flat stone. The whole is surrounded with a circle of big stones. This funeral disposition is not prescribed in the ordinary Hindu ritual. Same is the situation in other fields where different burial material had been employed. But, in the Madras region where these stone monuments cover the graves, we know thanks to Tamil literature there were ancient inhabitants, called Kurumbar who have been conquered by the Pallavas. These Kurumbar were sheep-breeders and wool blanket weavers. Even now the region is fit only for sheep breeding. If we now consider other shepherds in Mysore who have been described long ago by Thurston and others under the names of Kurubas or Kurumbas, we

observe they built also dolmen-like graves. So the question rises: were not the Madras dolmen-like graves, left after the conquest of the region by the Pallavas, those of Kurumbar who migrated to Mysore or who belonged to the same stock already established there and still surviving ? No reply can be given immediately before further investigations. But, in this case, we see ethnological research may help the interpretation of archæological remains. At least, bringing together archæological and ethnological data rises interesting problems and may indicate trails to follow in new researches.

We have just considered obvious facts and evident needs in the field of the archæology in Tamilnad. There are also many hypothetical speculations on archæological material in other countries supposed to originate from Tamil industry. We cannot enter on this occasion into the controverted questions. In any way we have to wait for more information and enquiries. But, if we limit our scope to positive data of the archæology in Tamilnad we see before us a very large and productive field. Cultivating it with the help of modern means and together with the enquiries in the whole range of Tamil culture, we shall enjoy the sight of the full glory of Tamilnad.

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